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TECHNICAL COOPERATION IN STATISTICS

Crucial issues on technical cooperation

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

1. The Statistical Commission has placed in its agenda at all of its recent sessions (at least five) the issue of technical cooperation. One of the requested items has been an analysis of the funding provided for technical cooperation by national as well as international sources. Document E/CN.3/1997/18 is a report on this subject. However, in addition to funding concerns there are other, equally important areas, which are central in determining whether technical cooperation efforts are successful.

2. One area that is often overlooked in predicting the success of technical cooperation efforts is the commitment of the Government to the mission. Often it is not sufficient to have just the commitment of the national statistics office (NSO): its parent and associated ministries must be committed as well. The outputs of the project should be visible not only to the NSO but also to other government ministries as well as to the general public. An example may clarify this point. Suppose there exists a project for improving the capacity of a country to plan, execute and disseminate social data collections. The NSO may be quite excited about the project and may put considerable energy and resources at its end into the project. However, if the Government has determined that financial statistics are more important and if social statistics do not figure prominently in the national debate in the country, the results of the project - even if technically successful - may not make any difference in regard to decision-making by government officials or by ordinary citizens. In

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this case, the project may even be counter-productive. The donor country may not see tangible public use of its aid and those inside the Government may think that aid for statistics projects is not useful.

3. Both the donor country/agency and the recipient country, in deciding on a potential technical cooperation project, should consider not only the technical feasibility but also the usefulness of the project in the political and public decision-making arena. While statisticians should not, when acting in their capacity as professionals, engage on one or the other political side, they should nonetheless ensure that their products are important to the political debate. This factor should also be important in regard to choosing technical cooperation projects.

4. An associated issue that is often difficult for government officials and the general public to understand is that concerning the time lag between the onset of technical cooperation and the production of useful outputs. While it is important not to raise unreasonable expectations about when results will be available, it is just as vital to indicate clearly the time pressures under which government officials operate. Statisticians understand that it may take years to properly design, execute and analyse a sample survey from scratch; however, it is very difficult to explain this to politicians and others whose time-horizon is one of months rather than years. The donor country can be particularly useful in this area by helping to devise interim measures while supporting the NSO in its need to build a strong base for proper data-collection, analysis and dissemination activities.

5. One of the fundamental methods for building capacity is through training. Two basic types of training are noted here. The first type focuses on producing an understanding of the broad and basic fundamentals of statistics, and is normally accomplished through the attending of a university, usually at the graduate level. There are many excellent graduate-level programmes in statistics throughout the world and some countries have begun to establish programmes devoted to graduate training in official statistics. However, the vast majority of these programmes are in developed countries. The most pressing need, then, is to dramatically improve the quality and quantity of undergraduate- and graduate-level university programmes in developing countries. This is certainly a long-range programme; however, if it is not undertaken only marginal gains can be expected, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, from the statistics infrastructure in developing countries. Resources can be concentrated in developing a few regional graduate or specialized schools.

6. The other type of training is more focused on some particular need such as the construction of business registers, sampling techniques and seasonal adjustment methods. Often, the most cost-efficient way to accomplish this type of training is through having the instructor go to the country involved. Many donor countries think the most effective way to deliver this type of support is through two or more reasonably short missions in the country. Fellowships or study tours can be an effective way for statisticians from one country to learn from those of their neighbours having similar problems or from more advanced offices. It is of course important to ensure that those participants on the study tour are the ones who can benefit directly from the technical material.

7. A problem that is frequently brought up with respect to training concerns the fact that after the training too often the recipients of the training leave with their new knowledge for higher-paying jobs in the private sector or in quasi-governmental organizations. Given the dynamics of many developing countries, including the great disparity in pay levels, it is probably unrealistic to expect this situation to change in the foreseeable future. Although it is possible to try to target training towards those more apt to stay and to require post-training contracts, both donor and recipient countries should expect that only a fraction - often only a small fraction - of those trained will be likely to remain in government service.

8. It is understandable that recipient countries would like to avail themselves of expertise from as wide a pool as possible. However, donor resources are scarce and their allocation should be carried out as efficiently as possible. It is clear that the recipient country is in the best position to coordinate its own requirements. In fact, no other entity can so identify country needs. However, donors should be aware of what help is being or has been proposed so that they can make informed decisions. We think an information system - not a coordinating mechanism - would be useful here. This system may be nothing more than a bulletin board organized by the recipient country and available to all. Each donor country would list its project, giving no more than a name and brief description. Other donors who might be interested in engaging in a project with that country could consult the listing and, if they wished, retrieve more information or decide to coordinate their work. The United Nations Statistics Division could provide this facility. We stress that the bulletin board is meant to facilitate coordination among donors should they wish to coordinate their activities.

9. It is important that technical cooperation projects encompass just that - cooperation - and not merely assistance. Mere technical assistance will usually not provide for any capacity-building. For effectiveness in building capacity, there must be a substantial technology transfer between donor and recipient. Moreover, there is more intellectual and emotional satisfaction when a partnership exists between the players. Such an atmosphere will contribute to the possibility of a lasting technology transfer.

10. Finally, the objectives of the project must be clear, measurable and of a substantially statistical nature. Technical cooperation projects in statistics should not be used as a disguise for obtaining vehicles and other equipment (admittedly, perhaps much-needed) only tangentially related to statistics.